

HISTORY
OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN TRENTON, N. J.

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT OF THE TOWN.

BY JOHN HALL, D.D.

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SOCIETIES OF NEW-JERSEY, PENNSYLVANIA, AND WISCONSIN.

NEW-YORK:
ANSON D. F. RANDOLPH, 683 BROADWAY,
CORNER OF AMITY STREET.

1859.

ENTERED, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1859, by
ANSON D. F. RANDOLPH,
in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the
Southern District of New-York.

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Chapter Seventh.

MR. COWELL'S DEATH AND BURIAL.

1759—1760.

IN June, 1759, Mr. Cowell was present in the Presbytery, which met at Trenton, but his health was probably then failing, as a request was made from the congregation, that his pulpit "might be supplied at least in part during his illness." He was present again at the meeting in Princeton, July 25, 1759; at which time his friend, President Davies, was received from Hanover. At Baskingridge, October 30 of that year, another petition was brought from Trenton, "praying that as Mr. Cowell is unable through sickness to attend the ministerial function, Mr. Guild might be ordered to supply them every third Sabbath." In compliance with this, Mr. Guild, pastor of the Hopewell (Pennington) church was directed to "supply as much of his time as he can at Trenton." Mr. Cowell was present at the meeting of Pres-

bytery, held at Nassau Hall, March 11, 1760. The regular Moderator being absent, Mr. Cowell was chosen in his place, and President Davies acted as clerk. One of Mr. Cowell's successors, William Kirkpatrick, was at this meeting, and another, Elihu Spencer, sat as a corresponding member.

"Mr. Cowell represented to the Presbytery that he has been long indisposed in body, and unable to discharge the duties of the pastoral relation to his congregation in Trenton, and therefore requested that he might be dismissed from it; and the congregation also by their petition, and the declaration of their commissioners, intimate their acquiescence in it.

"The Presbytery therefore consent to the request, and do hereby dismiss Mr. Cowell from said congregation; yet they affectionately recommend it to him that, if it should please God to restore him to an ability to exercise his ministry, he would preach as often as he can in that congregation while vacant, and in other vacancies as he shall have opportunity."

The last session of Presbytery, which Mr. Cowell attended, was at Lawrenceville (Maidenhead) September 17, 1760, the sixth meeting held in that year. On the 28th of October Messrs. Kirkpatrick and Treat were deputed to supply Trenton.

Mr. Cowell's decease took place on the first day of December, 1760, at his residence in Trenton. He was in the fifty-seventh year of his age, having served the Trenton people in the town and country congregations nearly twenty-four years.

His beloved friend Davies, who was then in the middle of the second year of his presidency of Nassau Hall, was called upon to preach in the church on the day of the interment. He fulfilled this office with great affection and fidelity, and it adds interest to the narrative to know that in a few weeks afterwards, (February 4, 1761,) that most eminent preacher, just past the thirty-sixth year of his age, was himself suddenly removed by death from the new sphere of usefulness and fame, upon which he had entered; so that on the page of the Synod's Minutes of May 20, 1761, is found the sentence: "The Presbytery of New-Brunswick further report, that it has pleased God to remove by death, since our last, the Rev. Mr. President Davies and the Rev. Mr. David Cowell."

In his fatal illness Mr. Davies remarked, that he had been undesignedly led to preach his own funeral sermon. He alluded to the fact that he

had delivered a discourse on New Year's day (1761) from the words in Jeremiah, "Thus saith the Lord, this year thou shalt die." He took this text, however, after having been informed that President Burr had preached from it on the first day of the year in which he died. Davies' sermon at the College on the first day of the preceding year, is entitled, "A New-Year's Gift." The text of that is: "And that knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." It is the fifty-ninth in the published collection.

The autograph, from which Davies preached at Mr. Cowell's funeral, is now before me. It is a sermon on the words from the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest," adapted to the occasion by a new introduction, and by what appears to be an impartial and discriminating estimate of the character of the deceased. As these parts of the discourse are interesting as relics of the great preacher, as well as for their descriptions of a prominent person in our history, I shall quote them in full.

The new opening was thus :

"While death reigns in our world, and spreads its pale

trophies so often before our eyes, how gloomy and dismal would our prospect be, especially at funeral occasions, if Jesus had not brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel! And how intolerable would be the doubtful struggles, the toils and fatigues of life, if we had no prospect of Rest! Add an everlasting duration to them, and they become too oppressive for human nature. But blessed be God, there remaineth a rest for the people of God; a rest that may be obtained by hard labor, though lost by unbelief. 'Let us labor, therefore, to enter into that rest.' Here heaven is represented under the agreeable idea of a time of *rest*; the way to obtain it pointed out, namely, by hard *labor*, and the *necessity* of laboring hard implied. These are the several topics I now intend to illustrate for the religious improvement of this melancholy occasion."

Having completed this plan in the usual fullness of his manner, the discourse closed with the new matter prepared for the day, as follows :

"What remains of the present hour, I would devote more immediately to the memory of the dead. To pronounce a panegyric on the dead is supposed to be the principal design of funeral sermons; and to praise the dead is a debt which envy itself will allow us to discharge. But it is not a regard to ancient custom, nor an apprehension that the eulogium will not be envied nor disputed, that excite me at present to take some particular notice of the character of our worthy friend, who now lies a pale corpse before us. It is rather my desire to concur with the sentence of heaven, and to praise the virtue which I

cheerfully hope has ere now received the approbation of the Supreme Judge. It is my full conviction that the character of the deceased was in many respects worthy of the imitation of the living, and that in recommending it, I shall recommend virtue and religion with advantage, as exemplified in life.

“ Indeed, it would have relieved me from some anxiety, if my worthy friend had nominated some one to this service, whose long acquaintance with him would have enabled him to do justice to his memory, and exhibit a full view of his character. During the short time that I have been a resident of this Province, he has been my very intimate friend, and I have conversed freely with him in his most unguarded hours, when his conversation was the full image of his soul. But I had only a general acquaintance with him for ten of the years before, and of the earlier part of his life I had no personal knowledge, and have received but a very imperfect account from his earlier acquaintances. But from what I have heard from persons of credit, or have known myself, I shall give you the following general sketch of his character; and as I would by no means incur the censure of flattery, or risk the reputation of my veracity, you may be assured I fully believe myself in the account I give of his character.

“ The Rev. Mr. David Cowell was born at Dorchester, in the government of Massachusetts Bay, and educated at Harvard College. I am informed by one of his early friends, that the characteristics of his youth were a serious, virtuous, and religious turn of mind, free from the vices and vanities of the wild and thoughtless age, and a remarkable thirst for knowledge. The study of books was

both his amusement and serious business, while he was passing through his course of collegiate education, and even before he entered upon it, and I am witness how lively a taste for books and knowledge he cherished to the last.

“I am not able to give you an account of the sensations and impressions of his mind from divine things in early life, which were the beginnings of his religion. But as every effect must have an adequate cause, from what I have observed in him of the Christian temper, I conclude he had been the subject of such impressions.

“He appeared to me to have a mind steadily and habitually bent towards God and holiness. If his religion was not so warm and passionate as that of some, it was perhaps proportionally more evenly uniform and rational. He was not flighty and visionary, nor yet dull and senseless. His religion was not a transient passion, but appeared to be a settled temper.

“Humility and modesty, those gentle virtues, seemed to shine in him with a very amiable lustre. Far from being full of himself, far from taking airs of superiority, or giving himself the preference, he often imposed a voluntary silence upon himself, when he could have made an agreeable figure in conversation. He was fond of giving way to his brethren, with whom he might justly have claimed an equality, and to encourage modest worth in his inferiors. He was not impudently liberal of unasked advice, though very judicious, impartial, and communicative when consulted. He had an easy, graceful negligence in his carriage, a noble indifference about setting himself off. And though his intellectual furniture, his experience and

seniority might have been a strong temptation to the usual foible of vanity and self-sufficiency, I never have seen any thing in his conduct, that discovered a high estimate of his own accomplishments. Indeed, he seemed not to know them, though they were so conspicuous that many a man has made a very brilliant appearance with a small share of them.

“He had a remarkable command of his passions. Nothing boisterous or impetuous, nothing rash or fierce, appeared in his conduct, even in circumstances that would throw many others into a ferment. “Had I not been told by one who has long and intimately known him, that he was capable of a manly resentment upon proper occasions, I should have concluded that he was generously insensible to personal injuries, for I can not recollect that ever I heard him speak a severe word, or discover the least degree of anger against any man upon earth. He appeared calm and unruffled amidst the storms of the world, peaceful and serene amidst the commotion and uproar of human passions.

“Far from sanguine, prattling forwardness, he was remarkably cautious and deliberate; slow to pronounce, slow to determine, and especially to censure, and therefore well guarded against extremes, and the many pernicious consequences of precipitant conclusions.

“In matters of debate, and especially of religious controversy, he was rather a moderator and compromiser than a party. Though he could not be neuter, but judged for himself to direct his own conduct, yet he did not affect to impose his sentiments upon others, nor set up his own understanding as an universal standard of truth. He

could exercise candor and forbearance without constraint or reluctance; and when he happened to differ in opinion from any of his brethren, even themselves could not but acknowledge and admire his moderation.

“His accomplishments as a man of sense and learning were very considerable. His judgment was cool, deliberate, and penetrating. His sentiments were well digested, and his taste elegant and refined. He had read not a few of the best modern authors, and though he did not often plod over the mouldy volumes of antiquity, he was no stranger to ancient literature, whether classical, philosophical, or historical. He could think as well as read, and the knowledge he collected from books, was well digested, and became his own. He had carefully studied the Sacred Scriptures, that grand accomplishment for a divine, and had a rational theory of the Christian system.

“He had an easy, natural vein of wit, which rendered his conversation extremely agreeable, and which he sometimes used with great dexterity to expose the rake, the fop, the infidel, and the other fools of the human species. But never did his humanity allow him to use this keen weapon to wound a friend, or the innocent, whether friend or foe. His wit was sacred to the service of virtue, or innocently volatile and lively to heighten the pleasure of conversation.

“He was a lover of mankind, and delighted in every office of benevolence. Benevolence appeared to me to be his predominant virtue, which gave a most amiable cast to his whole temper and conduct. Did he ever refuse to give relief or pleasure to any of his fellow-creatures, when

it was in his power to do it? I never had reason to think he did.

“That he might be able to support himself, without oppressing a small congregation, he applied some part of his time to the study and practice of physic, in which he made no inconsiderable figure. In this he was the friend of the poor, and spared neither trouble nor expense to relieve them.

“As I never had the happiness to hear him in the sacred desk, I can say but little of him in his highest character as a minister of the Gospel. But from what I know of his disposition, theological knowledge, and other religious performances, I doubt not but his sermons were judicious, serious, well-composed, and calculated to show men the way of salvation.

“In prayer, I am sure, he appeared humble, solemn, rational, and importunate, as a creature, a sinner in the presence of God; without levity, without affectation, without Pharisaical self-confidence.

“In the charter of the College of New-Jersey, he was nominated one of the trustees, and but few invested with the same trust, discharged it with so much zeal, diligence, and alacrity. His heart was set upon the prosperity of the infant institution, and he exerted himself in its service, nor did he forget it in his last moments.*

“This church has lost a judicious minister of the Gospel, and, as we hope, a sincere Christian; the world has lost an inoffensive, useful member of society; this town an agreeable, peaceable, benevolent inhabitant; the College

* Mr. Cowell bequeathed fifty pounds to the College.

of New-Jersey a father, and I have lost a friend; and I doubt not but public and private sorrow and lamentation will be in some measure correspondent, and express the greatness of the loss.

“Let us endeavor, my brethren, to copy his amiable character, and make his virtues our own. The character, indeed, is not perfect. The friend, the scholar, the minister, the Christian was still a man; a man of like passions with ourselves; and, therefore, he undoubtedly had his blemishes and infirmities. He is at best but a sinner sanctified and saved. However, I shall not describe his faults, because I hardly knew them, and because greater can be found almost every where. His virtues and graces are not so common, and therefore I have exhibited them to your view for imitation.

“With him the dubious conflict of life is over, and we hope he has entered into rest, and sweetly fallen asleep in Jesus. Let us also labor to enter into that rest, lest any of us fall by unbelief.”

Mr. Cowell's body was deposited in the church-yard at Trenton, and the grave, which is within a few feet of the western wall of the church, is designated by a head-stone with the following inscription :

“In memory of the

REVD. MR. DAVID COWELL.

Born in Dorchester, 1704.

Graduated in Harvard College, Cambridge, N. E., 1732.

Ordained at Trenton, 1736.

Died December the 1st, *Ætatis suæ* 56, 1760.